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Women, Globalisation and civil society in the MENA area: Between marginalisation and radicalisation

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Abstract

This article analyses the condition of women in the MENA area in the light of the challenges faced by those countries within the context of globalisation.

It will argue that, if the position of the MENA countries in the global political economy is increasingly marginalised, this is even truer for women, who are left behind in the process of up-skilling necessary to catch up with the increasing technological demands imposed by globalisation.

Moreover, the crisis of the Arab State within globalisation seems to produce and increasing radicalisation of society, with all that this means in terms of further marginalisation of women.

In this article a transnationalist conceptualisation of globalisation is adopted.

Introduction

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Moreover, the crisis of the Arab State within globalisation seems to produce and increasing radicalisation of society, with all that this means in terms of further marginalisation of women.

In this article a transnationalist conceptualisation of globalisation is adopted.

This is particularly relevant if we consider that the definition of globalisation adopted here implies that it is a dynamic process, a sort of virtuous circle that once activated produces more and more integration. Indeed, a conceptualisation of globalisation resting on the central role played by technological development entails the need of a constant updating and re-qualification of skills for societies to keep up with scientific progress[1].

Societies failing to embark on this constant updating, although in absolute terms may gain some skills, are doomed to be progressively more and more marginalised from globalisation and therefore be more and more worse off.

This poses the problem of the polarisation of wealth in both social and geographical terms. Those societies and societal strata who already have access to

educational and vocational systems and have the economic possibility of remaining in education for longer, if not to stay in education forever (the so called concept of the 'knowledge society'), are in a much better position in the global political economy. On the contrary, the lower strata of society, as well as the weakest ones, like the elders or the women, and especially those living in marginalised countries, will be increasingly left aside by the fast moving world of the new skills necessary to keep up with globalisation. It follows that the social and geographical wealth gap is deemed to increase, leading to the paradox of 'marginalisation within globalisation'. Indeed, as Mittleman puts it:

'The further away populations are from the global economy, whether in rich or poor countries, the worse they fare in terms of well-being, wealth and social protection. These divisions exist not only between states but also within states.' [2].

In light of this, the first section of this article is devoted to verifying the level of technological integration (or marginalisation) of the Arab world and the MENA countries in general, and of women within them in particular and their capacity to catch up with the skills necessary to gather the full benefits of globalisation.

However, in the transnationalist perspective, the restructuring of production leading to flexible specialisation does not rely only on a change in the techno-economic structure of a specific territory, but also implies cultural transformations affecting civil society[3]. Indeed, in the transnationalist conceptualisation, globalisation is a dialectical, dynamic process affecting civil society, transforming societal institutions and conducing to the establishment of the new social relations[4]. Thus, as Mittleman puts it:

'In so far as the flexible specialisation model as a productive system requires strong relations with civil society, socio-cultural institutions may represent either a constraining or a potentially enabling factor'[5].

It is therefore necessary to analyse also the evolution of civil society institutions and social capital in the MENA area to see how they have been modified by globalisation-induced economic restructuring and how women are integrated within them. This is the subject of the second section of this article.

Technological marginalisation

Technological innovation is integral to globalisation, especially new information technologies, transportation and communication. Although these are becoming spread around the globe, this does not happen evenly among regions and nations and therefore the scope for broadening global inequalities increases, instead of decreasing[6]. Furthermore, technological development has not been taking place completely by chance, but is itself a socially and institutionally embedded process which is much more likely to happen in those societies fostering it; it is therefore less likely to take place in countries that are already lagging behind (Dicken 2011:76).

Finally, the weaker strata of society are likely to be progressively weaker if they are unable to be integrated in the technological revolution implied by globalization. This is a typical self-reinforcing dynamic which leaves the losers further and further away.

This is particularly true in the case of the Arab world where technological integration has been very weak in the last decades, especially with respect to women. For some scholars:

'The Arabs can be said to be suffering from technological anorexia; and they are disheartened because they are powerless. Arab analysts point to a state of paralysis on both the national and regional levels' [7].

Also according to the conclusions of the second Arab Human Development Report, completely dedicated to building a knowledge society, the situation of Arab technological production and expertise was dire[8].

In order to substantiate these considerations this section will first look at the technological sources of globalisation and then assess to what extent they have been achieved in the Arab world and, more specifically, by women

The qualitative definition of globalisation adopted in this article relies on the assumption that the current phase of capitalist development is defined by some technological achievements that make it different from any other stages in the development of the world economy. In particular, scholars refer to the current phase as the early stages of the fifth Kondratiev wave (K-wave); a digital, information and communication technology one [9]. Each K-wave is characterised by various dimensions: the main 'carrier' branches, the infrastructure, the solutions offered to previous problems by the new techno-economic paradigms, the organisation of firms and forms of cooperation and competition, and, most importantly for our purposes, the geographical focus, which clearly does not include the MENA area[10]. In Dicken's conceptualisation, in the current wave of technological innovations, the above dimensions are substantiated as in the figure below.

Figure -1: Kondratiev fifth long wave: Late 1990s onwards

Main "carrier" branches	Infrastructure	Solutions offered to previous problems by the new techno-economic paradigms	Organisation of firms and forms of cooperation and competition,	Geographical focus
Computers Digital Information technology Internet Software Telecommunication Optical Fibers Robotics Ceramics Biotechnology	*Digital networks Satellites*	*Flexible manufacturing systems Networking Economies of scope Electronic control systems and components Systematisation Integration of design, production and marketing*	*Networks of large and small firms based increasingly on computer networks and close co-operation technology, quality control, training, investment planning and production planning (just-in-time).*	*Japan, USA, Germany, Other Europe, Sweden, Taiwan, Korea, Canada, Australia*

Source: Dicken 2011:79, adapted from.

This scheme allows us to recognise the technological innovations which are progressively more significant as sources of integration in the global political economy and to define the indicators used in the literature to identify the degree of integration of a country or region in it. There is a generalised consensus in the literature[11] that the telecommunications revolution and the widespread use of internet and digital resources that facilitate not only generic communication, but also learning and production processes are the most significant technological innovations of the current phase of capitalist development.

However, the spread in the use of ICT technologies is extremely uneven around the globe and amongst societal groups. Instead of producing a general shrinking of the time-space surface, technological innovations have exacerbated, in relative terms, the peripherisation of some parts of the world. The digital divide is therefore a reality increasingly privileging certain countries and certain social groups over others, especially urban spaces and big cities in the developed world (Sassen 1991, Talani et al. 2013). Moreover, as access to communication technologies is,

nowadays, fundamental to acquire vital information and knowledge, its increasingly uneven distribution poses increasingly serious developmental problems[12].

The figures released by ITU (2013)[13] confirm the existence of a clear technological divide between developing and developed countries[14].

Within the developing world, Asia is the region of the world improving the most in terms of access to ICT technologies, accounting for more than half of all mobile subscriptions in 2013. As far as internet is concerned, ITU estimated that 2.7 billion people, which is 39 per cent of the world's population, would be using the internet by the end of 2013. Access to internet would however remain limited in the developing world with no more that 31 per cent of the population forecasted to be able to be online at the end of 2013, compared with 77 per cent in the developed world. Europe would remain the most connected region in the world with 75 per cent internet penetration, while Asia and the Pacific would have 32 per cent rate of penetration and Africa only 16 per cent[15].

Also, household internet penetration, which is often considered the most important measure of internet access, was forecasted to be growing, with 41 per cent of the world's households connected to the internet by the end of 2013. However, notwithstanding the generally positive outlook, 90 per cent of the 1.1 billion households around the world that are still unconnected are in the developing world.

In 2013 two thirds of the world's population, around 4.5 billion people were still offline and they were overwhelmingly in the developing world, especially Africa[16].

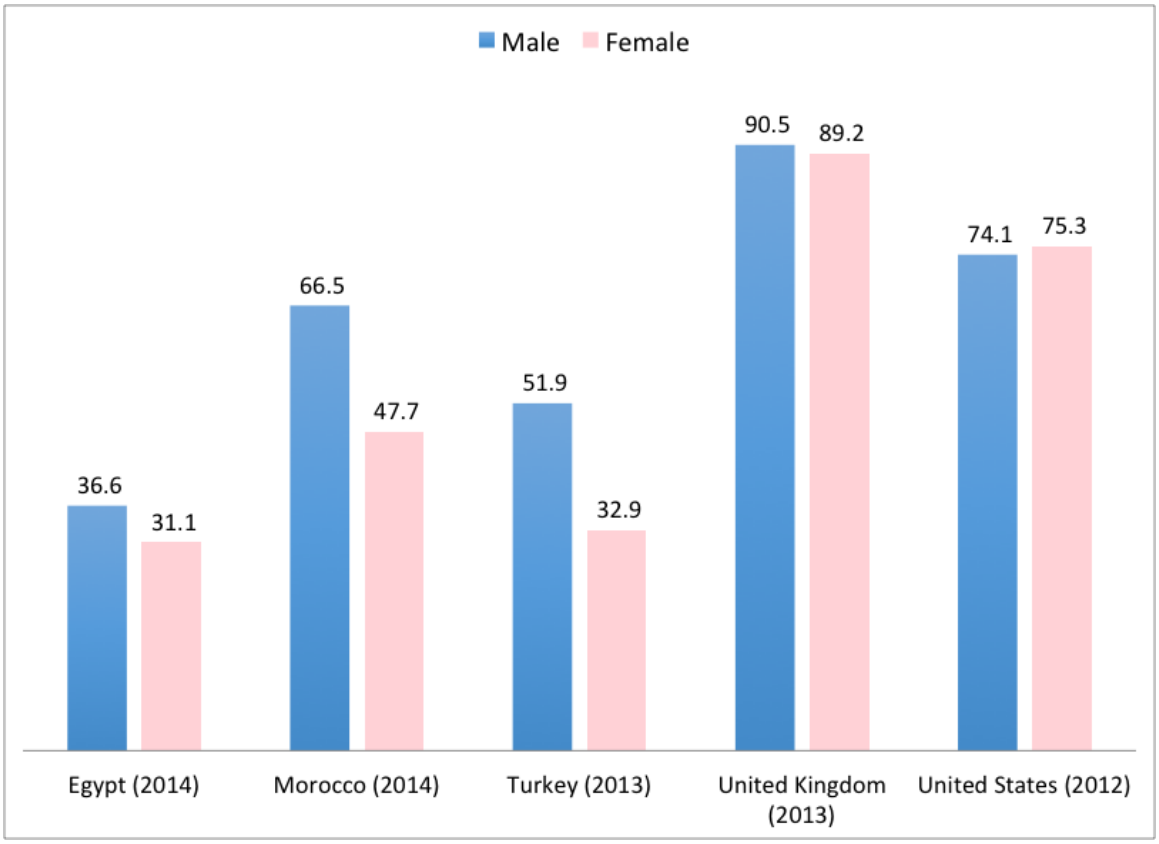
Moreover, although the cost of fixed-broadband services dropped enormously between 2008 and 2013, decreasing by 82 per cent if measured as a share of GNI per capita, in developing countries residential fixed-broadband services remained very expensive, accounting for over 30 per cent of average monthly GNI per capita compared to just 1.7 per cent of average national income in wealthy countries. In some developing countries, that figure rises to well over 50 per cent[17].

Also, differences in high-speed broadband internet access persist. The best performers in terms of access speeds were in Asia: the Republic of Korea, Hong Kong (China) and Japan. In Africa, on the contrary, fewer than 10 per cent of fixed-broadband subscriptions offered speeds of at least 2Mbit/s[18].

Finally, in developing countries the gender divide was still very significant with 16 per cent fewer women than men using the Internet, compared with only 2 per cent fewer women than men in the developed world[19].

As far as the MENA region is concerned, data on the use of internet divided by gender are very revealing.

Figure 2 Individuals using the Internet (from any location) by gender



Source: ITU database as accessed on February 9, 2016

Indeed, not only MENA countries have by far fewer individuals using the internet, but also the gender gap is much bigger.

For example, in Egypt only 36.6% of men, ever uses internet but women who use internet are 31.1%. In Turkey the gender gap is almost 20% less women using internet and this is compared to the US where actually more women than men use internet.

Hence, the analysis of indicators relating to the usage of telecommunications and internet or digital resources (so-called Information and Communication Technology, ICT indicators) can help in establishing whether or not a country and/or a region is catching up with the globalisation process.

The UN (2008) identifies 41 core ICT indicators, divided into four groups[20]:

1. ICT infrastructure and access (12 indicators)
2. Access to, and use of, ICT by households and individuals (13 indicators)
3. Use of ICT by businesses (12 indicators)
4. The ICT sector and trade in ICT goods (4 indicators).

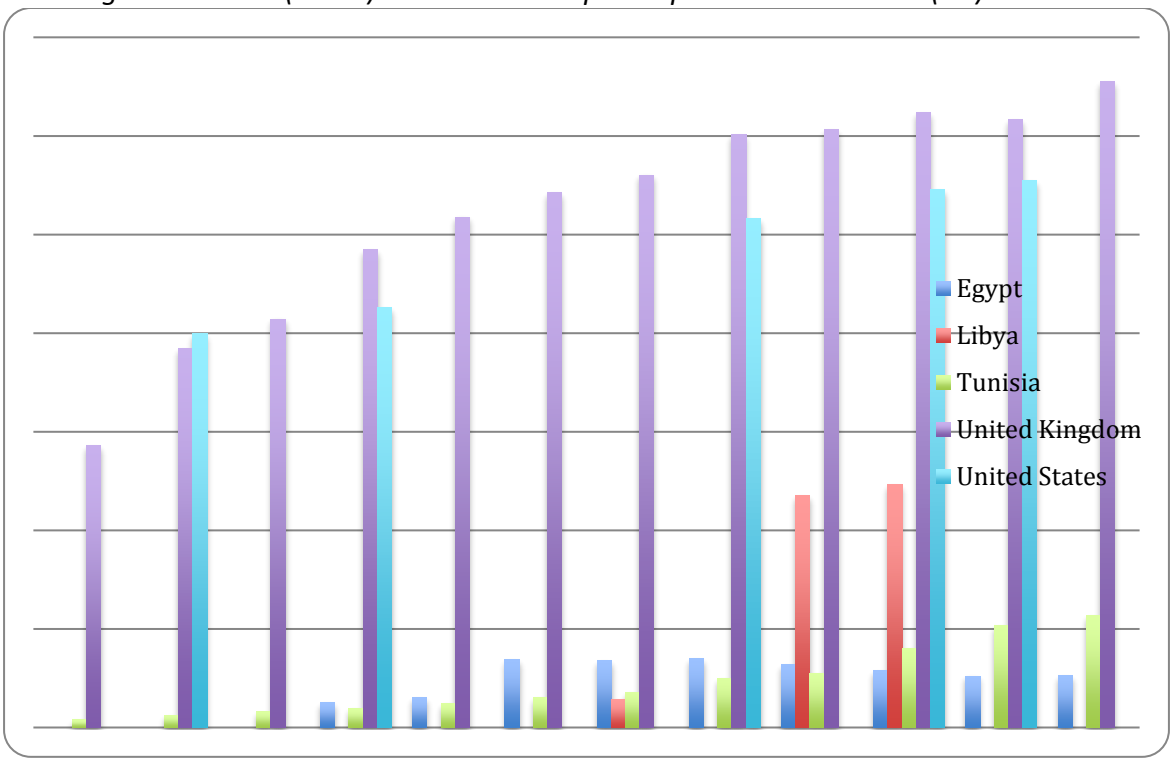
Reference is made below to some such indicators in the Arab world in general and in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia in particular. It is worth noting, however, that the author does not consider these indicators the only relevant ones to assess marginalisation, as symptoms of lack of integration via ICT indicators do not appear totally reliable. Indeed, if we look at indicators of access to technology for countries

such as China, these are still relatively low (although they have been improving at a fastest rate than anywhere else), but this cannot and does not mean that the country is not being increasingly integrated in the global economy.

Given these considerations, the Arab region[21] and the countries considered in this study are, without doubt, lagging behind in terms of access to the new technologies.

With respect to the first category of indicators, ICT infrastructure and access, for example, the position of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia is very negative, with Tunisia and Egypt not reaching even 5 internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2011 (Figure below).

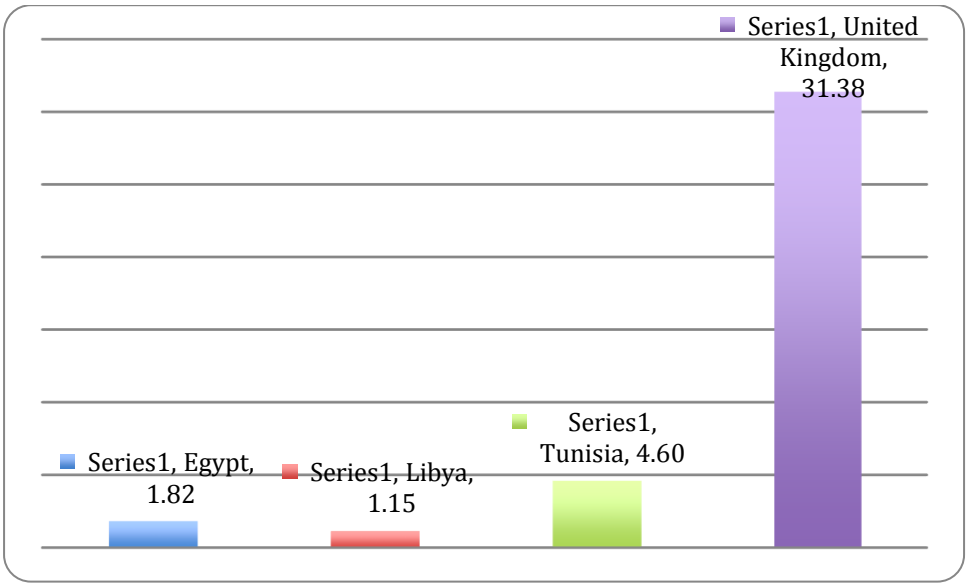
Figure -3: Fixed (wired) internet subscriptions per 100 inhabitants (A4)



Source: ITU-statistics

Even worse is the situation of the number of fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in the three countries considered, with Egypt recording less than 2 in 2010, Libya around 1, and Tunisia not reaching 5 (Figure below).

Figure -4: Fixed (wired) broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants 2010 (A5)



Source: ITU-statistics

In terms of access to, and use of, ICT by households and individuals, the latest data do not portray a particularly positive picture. The proportion of households with a computer in Egypt in 2011 was around 36 per cent and the number of individuals who used a computer was only 32 per cent. Only 30 per cent of the Egyptian population had access to internet at home as opposed, for example, to 85 per cent of the British population. In Tunisia the situation was even worse, with only 19 per cent of households with a computer and only 11 per cent of the population with access to internet at home. In the last 12 months of 2011 the proportion of individuals who used a computer in Tunisia was only 24 per cent and even less, 17 per cent, used Internet, whereas in the UK this figure was 87 per cent. In Libya, the percentage of estimated internet users in 2010 was 14 per cent[22].

Table 1: Core indicators on access to, and use of, ICT by households and individuals 2010-2011

Core indicators on access to, and use of, ICT by households and individuals, latest available data

			Proportion of households with		*Proportion of individuals who used ICTs in the last 12 months*	
		Year of latest data	*(HH4) Computer*	*(HH6) Internet access at home*	*(HH5) Computer*	*(HH7) Internet*
61	Egypt	*2011*	36.4	30.5	32.4	...
115	Libya		...	...	...	...
208	Tunisia	*2010*	19.1	11.4	24.9 [29]	17.1 [29] [29]
216	United Kingdom	*2011*	84.6	85.1	...	86.8 [4]
217	United States	*2010*	75.5	71.1	...	71.7 [20]

Note:

... Data not available

\- Zero or quantity less than the unit shown.

Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database.

(1) Census. (2) Survey referring to July 2010 - June 2011. (3) Population age 15+. Survey referring to July 2010 - June 2011. (4) Population age 16-74. (5) Population age 7+ over the total population. (6) Population age 16+. (7) Value representative of electrified areas. (8) Value representative of electrified areas (9) Population age 16+. Survey was redesigned, therefore comparison with previous years should not be done. (10) Cable TV. (11) Data correspond to dwellings (not households). (12) Country estimate. (13) Population age 5+. (14) Refers only to radio device. (15) Population age 10+, in the last 3 months. (16) Estimate based on the households' survey. (17) Population age 20+. (18) Decrease in values confirmed by Ministry. (19) Population age 6+. (20) Population age 3+. (21) Preliminary results of Kuwait Census 2011. (22) Population 3+. (23) Population age 4+. (24) Based on Ministry survey 2009. (25) May include households with access at any place but not necessarily ownership. (26) Estimate based on the number of residential fixed telephone lines. (27) Estimate based on the number of dial-up Internet subscriptions. (28) Estimate based on the number of mobile cellular subscriptions. (29) Population age 10+. (30) Preliminary. (31) Population age 18+. (32) Population age 15+. (33) Refers to ownership by the household. (34) Refers to two urban districts (Paramaribo and Wanica) where 80 per cent of population live. (35) In the last 6 months. Population age 14+. Survey Apr-Sep. (36) Including PDAs, Smart Phone. (37) All population. (38) ITU estimate based on Information and Data on Information and Communication Technology Report, 2010. (39) DHS 2010-2011.

Concerning the use of ICT by businesses, data on regions outside Europe and excluding OECD member countries are fairly scattered. Until 2003, hardly any developing economy was collecting ICT usage statistics from businesses. In the last few years, more and more developing and transition economies started producing these statistics, yet they are mainly located in the Latin American and Caribbean region.

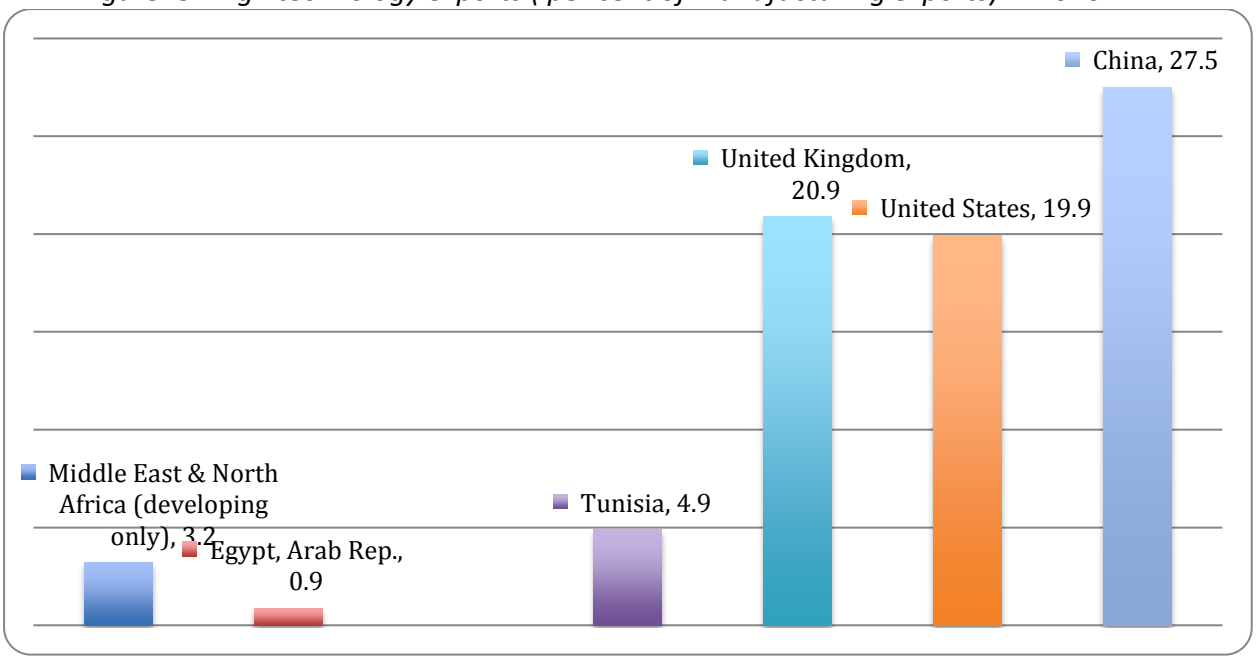
The data provided by UN and Eurostat show a very similar picture for the use of ICT by businesses as that found with households; widespread use of computers and internet is present only in developed economies. Moreover, in developing and transition economies the proportion of employees using a computer or internet is much lower than the proportion of businesses using a computer or internet. This means that within businesses with ICT, not many employees regularly use it[23].

In the MENA region, some country statistics are available only for Egypt. In Egypt, the proportion of businesses having internet was 53 per cent at the end of 2007, as opposed to 93 per cent in the EU 25 (UN 2008). The proportion of employees using computers was 18 per cent and only 10 per cent was using internet, whereas for the EU 25 these figures were 49 per cent and 37 per cent respectively (UN 2008).

In terms of core indicators for the ICT sector and trade in ICT goods, there is no data available for the region and for the countries considered. However, World Bank indicators for Science and Technology can help understanding the situation of these countries with respect to the technological content of their economies (World Bank 2013).

Indeed, the percentage of high technology exports, i.e., products with high R&D intensity, such as aerospace, computers, pharmaceuticals, scientific instruments, and electrical machinery, is very low in the MENA developing countries, recorded at only 3.2 per cent. In Egypt it is almost inexistent with 0.9 per cent of manufacturing export while in Tunisia it is around 5 per cent. For the sake of comparison, China high technology exports are 27.5 per cent of total, Britain's around 21 per cent and the US 19 per cent (Figure below).

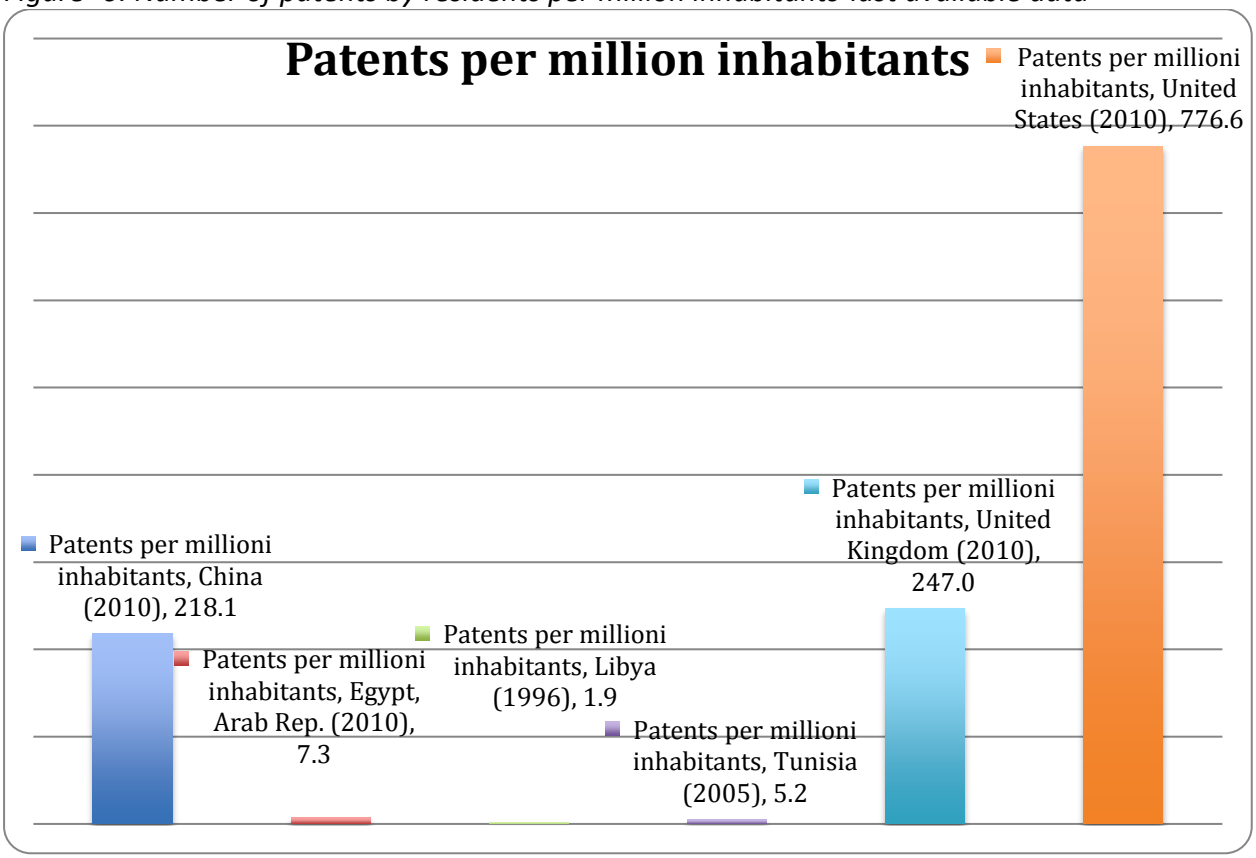
Figure -5: High technology exports (per cent of manufacturing exports) in 2010



Source: Elaboration of the author on data of the World Bank website http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/0,,menuPK:232599~pagePK:64133170~piPK:64133498~theSitePK:239419,00.html as accessed on March 15, 2013.

Even more relevant to ascertain the level of technological starvation of the MENA countries are figures relating to the number of patents per million inhabitants. As the graph below shows, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia are basically producing no new patents at all and are therefore not contributing to technological progress in any significant way.

Figure -6: Number of patents by residents per million inhabitants-last available data



Source: Elaboration of the author on data of the World Bank web-site http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/0,,menuPK:232599~pagePK:64133170~piPK:64133498~theSitePK:239419,00.html as accessed on March 15, 2013.

If knowledge and information are key to keeping up with the process of globalisation and avoiding further marginalisation, it is worth looking also at basic education indicators as well as indicators of the use of ICT in education. In the words of the Arab Human Development Report:

'A knowledge-based society is one where knowledge diffusion, production and application become the organising principle in all aspects of human activity: culture, society, the economy, politics, and private life.' (2003:2)

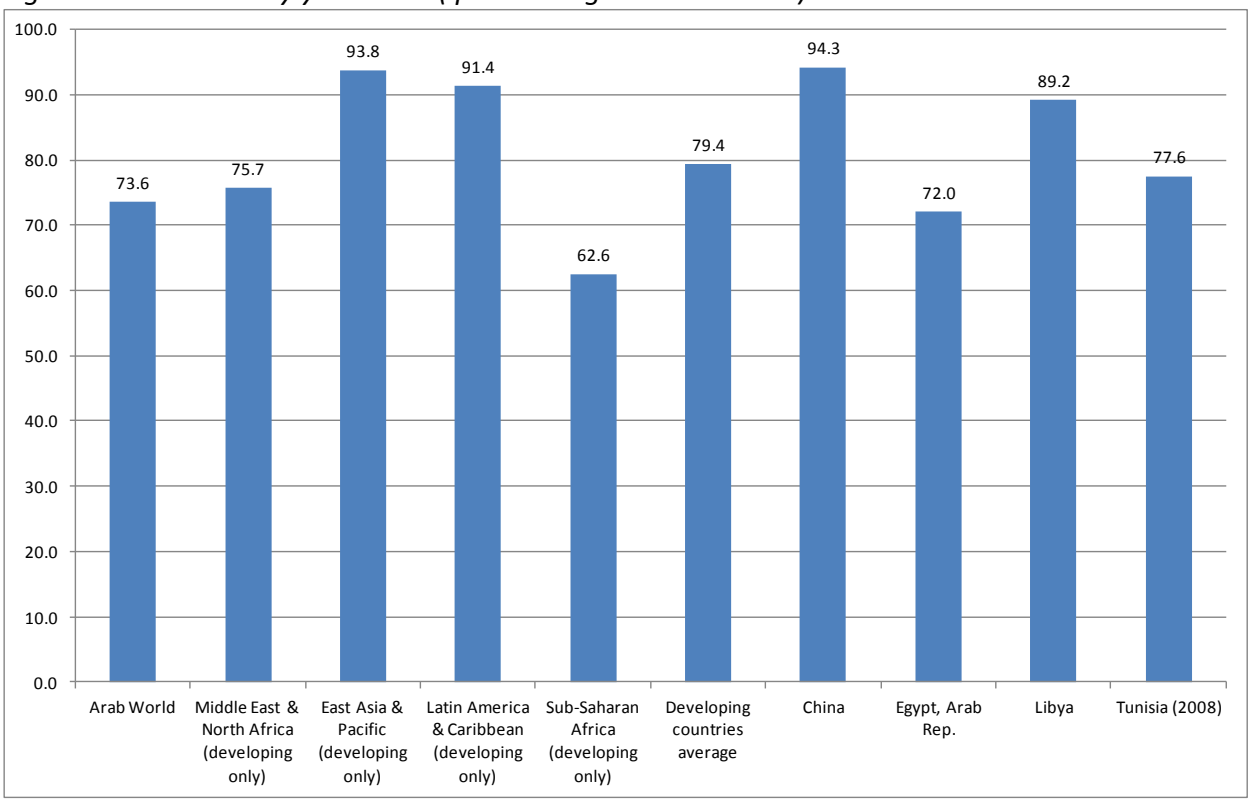
In Arab countries, key knowledge dissemination processes, such as education and socialisation, are profoundly constrained by social, economic, institutional and political impediments[24]. In particular, dwindling economic resources limit the possibility for individuals, families and institutions to acquire the epistemological and societal skills necessary for knowledge production.

Despite some gains in the quantitative expansion of education in Arab countries in the last decades, these are still modest in comparison with other

developing countries and do not allow the countries to meet the requirements of a knowledge society[25].

For example, in 2010, the Arab World and the MENA area still had lower literacy levels in the total adult population than the developing countries' average (Figure below).

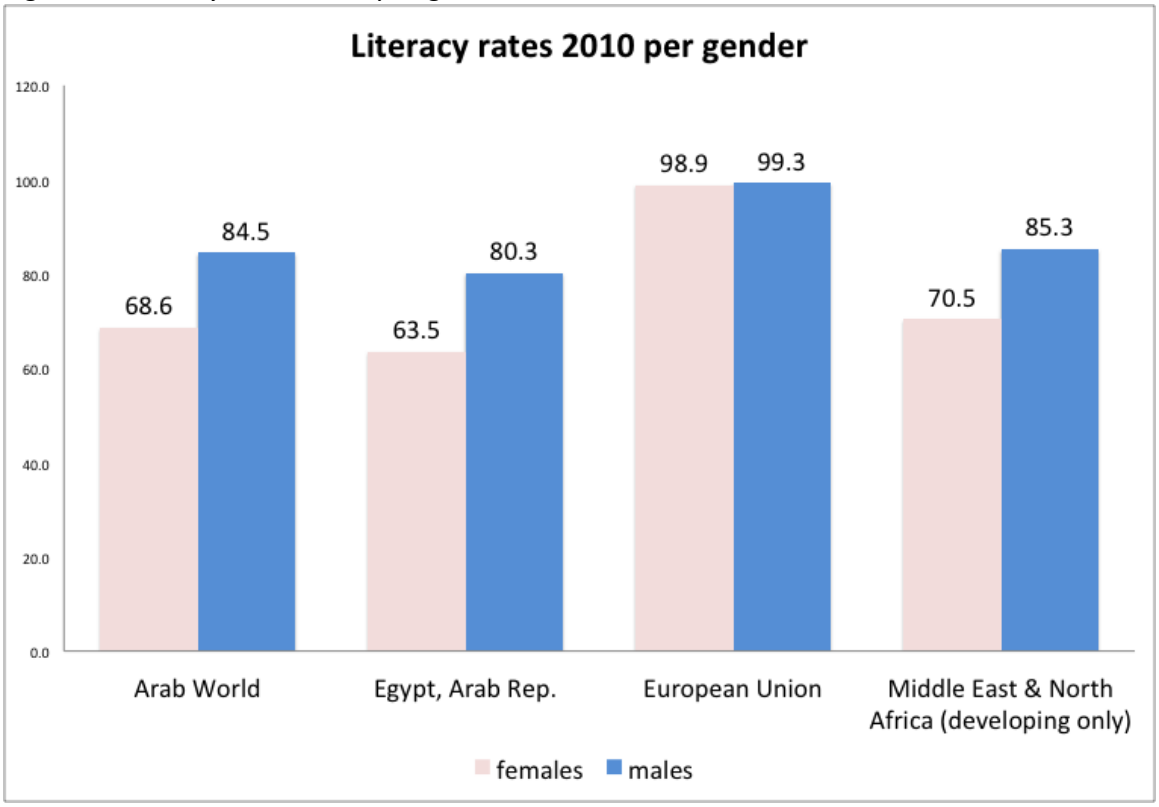
Figure 7: Adult literacy year 2010 (per cent age 15 and above)



Source: Elaboration of the author on data of the World Bank web-site http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/0,,menuPK:232599~pagePK:64133170~piPK:64133498~theSitePK:239419,00.html as accessed on March 15, 2013.

The situation is clearly worse for women, whose literacy rates in the MENA countries are 15% less than men, 16% less in the Arab world and almost 17% in Egypt, where the adult women literacy rate was only 63.5% in 2010!

Figure 8: Literacy rates 2010 per gender



Source: World Bank http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=Gender%20Statistics# as accessed on February 9, 2016

Moreover, many children still do not have access to basic education and public spending on education has actually declined in the MENA area from around 22 per cent of government expenditure in 2002 to 16 per cent in 2008[26].

Looking at some indicators of the use of ICT in education, the situation of MENA countries is not particularly positive. In Tunisia, for example, in 2008 only 40 per cent of schools had a telephone and around the same percentage had access to internet. Data for Egypt and Libya are not available[27].

In all cases, nevertheless, the most important challenge facing Arab education is its deteriorating quality[28]. In Egypt, for example a wide field survey revealed that mastery of the basic skills of reading and writing, and mathematics, which should be obtained in primary school, was exceptionally low, recorded at about 40 per cent and 30 per cent respectively[29].

In 2010/11, all of the Arab countries which took part in the Trends in Mathematics, and Science Study (TIMSS) a competition in mathematics and science for year 5 pupils, ended up at the bottom of the table. In mathematics, Tunisia was ranked 4th from the last with 359 points. As a point of comparison, Singapore was first with 606 points, followed by Korea with 605, Hong Kong with 602 and Chinese Taipei with 591[30].

Overall the data confirm that the MENA region is lagging behind in terms of the technological and educational requirements of entire sections of its society, especially women, to catch up with the process of globalisation.

As the development of civil society is often in the literature associated to the level of education, especially of women, and the use of modern technologies[31] this might point to a certain underdevelopment of civil society and social capital in these countries. However this conclusion is far too superficial and a closer attention to all the factors influencing the evolution and characteristics of civil society is needed. To this we turn our attention in the next section.

Women, civil society and social capital in the MENA area

The notion of civil society adopted by transnationalists is mainly a Gramscian one. Gramsci conceptualised civil society as the primary political realm, where socio-economic groups acquire consciousness of their interests and expectations, ideologies are produced and spread, and alliances formed[32].

It is in the context of civil society that the battle for the conquest of true hegemonic power takes place, thanks also to the fundamental role played by organic intellectuals. This means that any socio-economic group aspiring to take the lead of the state needs to gain consensus in the context of civil society by both taking care of the economic needs of the other socio-economic strata and convincing them through ideological means that the interests of the dominant socio-economic historic bloc coincide with the interests of society as a whole[33].

On the other hand, the idea of civil society has been associated also to the notion of social capital as developed nearly one century ago, in 1916, with the work of L. Judson Hanifan[34]. In the tradition influenced by the work of Bourdieu, social capital is defined as resources embedded in civil society and accessed and used by actors for action[35]. The broadly used conception from Coleman of social capital emphasises its impact at the level of community[36]. This conception has acquired a substantial heuristic value thanks to the contribution of Robert Putnam (2002:3). The core idea of social capital is that a person's social assets, family, friends, associates, are not irrelevant in a person's life. On the contrary, they are crucial to solve situations of crisis or to obtain economic or other advantages. This is not only true for individuals but for communities too, to the extent that the density of social capital in a given community can bring about material advantages and avoid or limit the impact of crises. In few words civil society matters, or, in Putnam's words:

'civil society affects the health of our democracies, our communities and ourselves'[37]

The link between social policy and social capital lies in the amount and quality of mutual welfare delivered informally by friends, mutual support groups and community (neighbourhood or identity/religious-based) associations, which adds to and reinforces the social service nets provided by law. Social capital represents communal assets produced and reproduced by inter-personal relations based on trust and reciprocity and sustained by solidarity norms and values, including religious ones, as well as (in some contexts such as family and friendship networks) by emotional investment. Social capital relations are by their nature inclusive rather than exclusive.

Three interrelated and cumulative dimensions of social capital are important. These are: bonding social capital (relationships at the basic level of the family, built on identity and sense of belonging), bridging social capital (relationships that tie together different families and neighbourhoods into a larger civic community able to pursue common goods and outcomes) and linking social capital (relationships that connect the civic community and political/policy making institutions).

Importantly, the amount of social capital in a community is not given; it varies across time and space which makes it imperative to study this notion in different societies and different historical periods.

How do social networks and relations matter? They matter first of all for the people who belong to them, providing for psychological and social comfort, but also for plain economic returns. This is what the economists would call 'the internal value' of social capital and it defines social capital as a private good. One classical example is the case of employment opportunities created by the intervention of friends or relatives or, more generally, 'social connections'.

However there is also an external value of social capital, as its existence provides benefits also for those who do not belong to the social networks in question. In the economists' jargon, there are some positive externalities from social capital. For example a neighbourhood watch programme against local crime produces a safer environment also for those who do not take part in it. From this point of view, social capital represents also a public good. Even more importantly, it helps to solve collective action problems as it produces trustworthy relations. In other words, the existence of a social interaction based on trust can help people to act for the collective good without coercion or immediate reciprocation.

In operative terms, scholars distinguish between a narrow and a wider definition of social capital[38]. In a narrow sense, social capital refers only to the networks and groups joined voluntarily by individuals and involving regular face-to-face meetings. This could be cultural associations, religious groups or even sport clubs. In a broader sense, individuals can belong to social groups also by chance, or birth, or constraint, as in the case of a family or a social class or a neighbourhood. Finally in the widest meaning, social capital refers to situations where meetings are irregular and casual, like groups of commuters, or participants in a public demonstration.

Consequently, the social cohesion of civil society can be measured at various levels:

1. Within each groups and communities
2. Between different groups and communities.

This distinction, as well as the distinction between the narrow and the wider definition of social capital is especially relevant when dealing with social capital in Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, as further elaborated below, the most relevant form of social capital in these countries is narrow social capital, especially religious social capital (RSC). Moreover the recent evolution of civil society and social capital in MENA countries, especially resource-poor ones, substantiates the hypothesis that new forms of social cohesion have been created both horizontally, i.e. within social classes, and vertically, i.e., between social classes.

Finally what is most relevant is whether social capital is created through public intervention or it is a completely private venture. Indeed, the relations between

state and civil society are very complex. The state is shaped by society, but society is also shaped by the state and its political institutions and legislation, as becomes very clear when studying MENA countries' civil societies. Indeed, the state can also hinder the formation of social capital through repressive policies, as in the case of Tunisia.

As far as religious organisations are concerned, these are generally considered in the literature about social capital as just another form of voluntary association[39]. Evidence shows, however, that Religious Social Capital (RSC), as represented for example by faith-based organisations active in civil society, plays a distinctive role not only in building social capital but also with respect to its wider implications, including political ones[40]. In addition, as we will see below, the Arab world is peculiar in the extent to which social capital is generated mainly through religious institutions, also due in part to the distinctive characteristics of Islam.

Following Gramsci (1975, 1999), it is conceivable to hypothesise that the impact of globalisation on the Arab States considered, especially its impact in terms of crisis of the nation state, produced the conditions for the emergence of a new hegemonic historic bloc. This was based on alternative ideologies such as Islam and underpinned by different socio-economic alliances, namely a new alliance between the 'discontented' middle class(es) and the 'dispossessed' lower one[41], what Harvey (2008)[42] calls the discontented and the dispossessed[43]. According to the relevant literature,[44] in the Middle East, the bulk of the middle class would be represented by civil servants, which are, by definition, discontented by the retreat of statist regimes[45]. This is compounded by professionals and a very limited group of small and medium entrepreneurs, sometimes explicitly Islamic business (Schlumberger 2008). Indeed, most of the very small entrepreneurs would belong to the category of the 'dispossessed' lower classes. With respect to the business component of the middle class, both in Egypt and in Tunisia, state capital tended to ally more with international capital than with local small and medium capital, which was generally weak, according to Ayubi's conceptualisation[46].

As noticed by Ayubi:

'The private business bourgeoisie, insofar as it was allowed to exist, became subservient to the State and to the requirements of state capitalism' (2008:181).

Even the heavy liberalisation policies adopted in both countries as a consequence of globalisation-induced economic restructuring seem to have failed to incorporate local private small and medium entrepreneurs not connected to the regimes into the system[47].

On the other hand, the dispossessed are the poor, i.e., those who do not have possessions and therefore are unable to access the market place to meet their basic needs[48].

Both strata have been increasingly marginalised by the statist regimes in Middle East, from the political sphere as well as also from the socio-economic and cultural ones[49]. Indeed, the latest batch of economic restructuring measures mainly affected the lower and middle classes[50]. In the words of Ayubi (2008:181):

'Marginalisation is an important phenomenon in many Third world countries, not only because of the large size of the lumpenproletariat but also because of the

dangerous phenomenon of the unemployment (or underemployment) of the educated'

Such marginalisation is a very important breeder of protest movements, such as "Political Islam"[51].

What it is hypothesised here is that, in the Arab world, especially in the Middle East, Islam progressively became the point of reference of those strata of civil society marginalised by the existing regimes: the discontented middle classes and the lower classes. This means that in practical terms, Islam increasingly came to represent their only ideology, as well as the basis of their identity and, wherever possible, of their social relations and networks. In other words, it became the source of their social capital. This might have been favoured by the ideological weakness of the existing power bloc, which limited its capacity to gain hegemony in civil society[52]. Thus, in this context, the impact of globalisation on civil society would be the creation of a new socio-economic alliance between the marginalised strata of civil society cemented by a common ideology, Islam. How this took place is the subject of the next section.

Islam and civil society

The purpose of this section is to found out whether the crisis of the nation state as a consequence of globalisation and the lack of a regional integration project in the MENA area has been accompanied by a progressive re-Islamisation of civil society, particularly the middle and lower classes, and whether this is reflected in the emergence of a distinct Islamic social capital within those socio-economic groups[53]. The idea is to ascertain to what extent Islamic Social Capital and Islamic Social Institutions favored the decline of previously well-established political solutions, or whether they have been constrained by repressive policy-making[54].

Already before the outburst of the Arab Spring, commentators and experts of Arab politics had noticed how from the 1990s Arab societies had undergone fundamental changes[55]. In Egypt, for example, economic crises, economic restructuring and globalisation had progressively undermined the statist order created during the Nasserist rule. In line with our transnationalist perspective, these changes brought about a weakening of state control over the economy and society, especially the withdrawal of the public sector and the progressive demise of the subsidy system[56]. Rutherford (2008:2) notes how these transformations also eroded the already weak political ideology legitimating the regime, whose liberal conception of law within the judiciary was increasingly challenged by the Islamic conception of governance proposed by the Muslim brotherhood and political Islam. In a word, the declining statism of the regime, which was no longer sustainable given the constraints imposed on the state by globalisation, was increasingly challenged by an alternative political ideology based on Islam[57]. It is outside the scope of this very short section to discuss the economic ideology of Islam or rather the complex and contradictory relation between Islam and capitalism, which has been addressed exhaustively elsewhere[58].

The role of Islam in society and politics is a highly debated question, not only between scholars, but also within Islam itself[59]. With respect to its basic principles, Islam can be considered a unified whole[60]. However, countless interpretations exist relating to secondary prescriptions as well as to the objectives of the Islamic texts, to the extent that experts of Muslim-majority societies generally speak about 'Islams' to underline the diversity of Islamic social and cultural contexts[61]. As Ramadan puts it:

'What is meant by the concept of "Islamic Civilisation" is precisely this: One single Islam, a diversity of interpretations and a plurality of cultures'[62].

Political Islam does not come in a single, unified version either, although its origins have to be traced back to the late 19th Century reformers who were both pan-Islamic and anti-colonial and had a great impact on 20th Century Islamic thought[63]. According to them, Muslims had to go back to their religious teachings, acquire consciousness of their subordination and free themselves from the chains of colonialism. From this perspective, Islam as a religion was invoked and played a fundamental role in the liberation from colonialism as well as in the future political, economic and cultural organisation of Muslim-majority states. It was however only with the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) that what is known now as 'political Islam' or 'Islamism' acquired a much clearer definition. Relying heavily on the thoughts of the first generation of reformers, al-Banna proposed early on a program of re-islamisation of Egypt[64].

Currently, Islamist movements are divided mainly on the following issues: 1) the definition of who is a Muslim and what are their prerogatives; 2) the use of violence; 3) the application of the sharia as a closed legal system or as open to foreign references such as democracy; 4) whether it is acceptable to create an Islamist political party or it is preferable to retain the status of a religious and social organisation; 5) the role of women in Muslim-majority societies; 6) the relation with people of other religion or no religion in society; 7) the relation with the West[65].

To understand the capacity of Islamism to conquer the realm of civil society, it is extremely important to underline that not only did it originate as a legalistic, societal movement, but it also never lost its original strategy of reforming society from the bottom-up, by educating the masses in order to change society as a whole and restructure the state into the Islamic State[66].

Indeed, the relationship between religion and sovereignty has always been a contested one in the Arab State. Even in the most advanced Islamic constitutions, such as the Tunisian one, moving away from the Sharia to a legal system devoid of theological-political influence proved extremely difficult; the legislature stipulated that Islam is the religion of the state. Consequently, citizens were not free to choose their beliefs, or lack thereof[67].

In Egypt, the re-islamisation of society and the American alliance went hand in hand, constituting another paradox, which is known in the literature as the Egyptian paradox[68]. The explanation might be found in the need of the regime to protect itself from the violent sections of the Muslim Brotherhood which attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954, successfully managed to eliminate Sadat in 1981[69], almost killed Mubarak in 1995 and were increasingly gaining consensus in civil

society[70]. Indeed, although politically the Islamists had not yet won power, they were increasingly taking control of the social body. As Meddeb puts it:

'In the war of words, the state thought it had to take away from the fundamentalists the argument denouncing the non-conformity of their society to Islamic norms. To defuse this criticism, the state decided to entrust to Al-Azhar the governance of souls, provided it would minimize the reach of political Islam. After such a tacit agreement, society found itself metamorphosed'[71].

What remains to be ascertained now is how Islamism was successful in its endeavor to gain cultural hegemony in Muslim-majority countries, to what extent and why[72].

A prominent source for identifying the role of Islamists in civil society, their level of penetration and their capacity to substitute the state in the provision of public goods is represented by the Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR), prepared by a team of prominent Arab intellectuals under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) between 2002 and 2009. These reports argued that throughout the Middle East Islamist groups had increasingly obtained broad popular support, had provided effective service networks and developed a formidable capacity to mobilise followers.

As underlined in the AHDR of 2002 the Arab world has a very established tradition of religious civil society organisations based on the 'waqf' system[73]. Since the end of the 19th Century this led to the creation of Islamic cultural associations and charities which, in line with the program of political Islam, were heavily involved in education, provision of health care and other social and religious matters. These organisations, whose activities within civil society were limited if not prohibited by the state in the past, witnessed a strong revival later on, especially in more recent decades as a consequence of the increasing difficulty of the state to provide similar services, or, in the words of the report:

'more or less encouraged by public authorities needing their assistance in times of difficulty'[74].

On the contrary, non-religious civil society organisations encountered several external constraints in playing their role effectively, such as for example the imposition of bureaucratic constraints in the form of control of civic associations by public authorities[75]. Moreover, non-religious civic associations were considered by the AHDR to be dysfunctional in various ways. They lacked internal democracy, as demonstrated by the weak participation of women and youth and the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual, usually, the founder of the organization[76]. This usually led to conflicts and often splits. Moreover, they were seen as lacking transparency in their decision-making processes and incapable of settling disputes peacefully through debates. In administrative terms they were considered unable to respect clear-cut rules of management and accountability. All these shortcomings contributed to non-religious NGOs encountering many problems in financing their activities. On the contrary, civil associations with a religious background were much more successful at maintaining financial independence. This

was the case because they enjoyed credibility and legitimacy in society as their actions accorded with traditional Arab and Muslim norms of civic action, associating such activities with welfare and charity work. Moreover, their missions were clear and their social impact immediate as they satisfied pressing and sensitive needs of the population[77]. Finally they could rely on donations from the private sector under the form of Zakat[78] as well as providing certain services for a fee.

As underlined by the reports, this was clearly not the case with other, more advocacy oriented kinds of civil society organisations which provided for functions or services alien to, or at least not appreciated by, the society at large. They provoked distrust amongst private donors, entering into antagonistic relations both with civil society and with the authorities and having to rely heavily on finances coming from international donors[79]. This, in turn deepened public hostility towards their activities and increased their incapacity to communicate with domestic societal actors who did not contribute to their activities either through voluntary work or through financial help[80].

Thus, throughout the Middle East, it is almost exclusively Islamist charities and social welfare organisations that have played a major role in addressing the socio-economic needs of Muslim societies.

In some resource-poor Muslim-majority societies, this role has been increasing with the crisis of the nation state and has not only affected the poorer strata of society[81]. In fact, Clark (2004) demonstrates through case studies of Islamic medical clinics in Egypt that the Islamic Center Charity Society in Jordan, and the Islam Women's Charitable Society in Yemen[82], were run and served also the interests of the middle classes[83]. Hence, Islamic social institutions (ISIs) were not only a means to conquer the lower classes, as often underlined in the literature[84], but have clearly been playing an increasingly essential role in providing social networks that strengthened the ties of solidarity amongst the different components of the middle-class, as well as between this and the lower class.

As clearly underlined by Clark:

'Then, as now, the middle class established nongovernmental organisations in reaction to state weakness'[85].

This also allowed for the diffusion of Islamic ideas amongst these classes, which produced as its outcome new social and political movements based on Islam as opposed to other, more secular, ideologies:

'ISIs are more than just a challenge to the State's ability to do its job; they are a challenge to the secular state itself. They represent an alternative organization of state and society – a potentially revolutionary one – based on Islam'[86].

In the case of Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood represented by far the most important religious civil society organisation and no doubt also the most successful one[87].

The creation of the Muslim Brotherhood happened in1928, just a few years after the demise of the spiritual caliphate exercised by the Ottoman Empire. The objectives of the Brotherhood were quite specific from the beginning and included a

return to Islam which had to be obtained through a bottom-up strategy based on programs of mass education, social and economic reform and progressive implementation of Islamic legislation. The final aim was to set up an 'Islamic State'[88]. To achieve this new moral, social and legal order, the program conceived by Al Banna' required a complete transformation of the educational system, asking, for example, for primary schools be attached to mosques. The formation of political parties was forbidden and civil servants were required to have religious training[89]. It seems clear that, from its establishment, political Islam, especially as embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood, had a clear agenda of conquering civil society before establishing an Islamic State. It defined itself not as a political party, but as solidarity-based social and educational organisation alternative to the state[90]. Eventually, al-Banna's ideas transcended national boundaries and gained millions of supporters all over the Arab world[91].

Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood was from its origins a civil society organisation building religious social capital especially amongst the strata of society who did not have full access to the public goods provided by the state. A more violent component came to the forefront in Egypt in the early 1960s as a reaction to the consolidation into power of Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970). The Brotherhood then started to include different trends, ranging from its mainly societal and legalistic origins to more radicalised and violent elements following Nasser's repression in the 1950s and 1960s[92]. With the retreat of the state and the progressive reduction of its services to the middle classes, the reach of the Muslim Brotherhood as a social solidarity system has substantially increased[93]. This societal dimension, therefore, has become all the more important. If the strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood during the regimes of Nasser and Sadat was divided between violent opposition to the regime and a grassroots program of conquest of civil society by focusing especially on education, in the course of Mubarak's regime, especially from the early 1990s, its reach became more capillary[94]. By 1992 the MB led all of the major professional associations, apart from that of journalists, and all of the university students' unions. The more that the regime faced difficulties in maintaining control of the economy and guaranteeing even the most basic services in some deprived areas, the more the MB intervened and substituted the state by establishing Islamic schools, health clinics based on Islamic rules and values and credit unions[95]. Moreover, this alternative network of schools, hospitals and social services was heavily supported by the so-called 'Islamic business sector'[96]. It is outside the scope of this discussion to identify foreign sources of financing of Islamic Social Institutions (Ramadan 2012; recently the Financial Times stressed the intervention of Qatar).

It might be true that the Islamists and the MB abstained from taking the lead of the events of Midan Tahir between the 25th and the 28th of January 2011. However, as rightly explained by Hamid (2011a:29):

For the members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—the oldest and most influential Islamist political party—the Arab Spring may not have been entirely of their making, but it surely was the answer to their prayers.

Indeed, the leaders of the MB were careful to instruct their militants not to shout explicit Islamist slogans in Tahir square, to avoid the US or other western countries intervening to crack down on the Islamist threat. However, the Brotherhood made its presence during the revolts was of vital importance providing medical services to the protesters, protecting them from violent repression and keeping order[97].

Contrary to Egypt, in Tunisia the retrenchment of the state in terms of welfare provisions was not so marked and, because of the control of the regime on civil society and its repressive policies, civic groups, including Islamic groups, did not manage to be active on social issues[98].

In Tunisia, the Islamic political opposition, Al Nahda, was a direct product of the regime. In response to the growing relevance of secular civil society organisations, such as labour unions, student movements and other secular political groupings in the early 1970s, Bourguiba allowed the formation of a religious association for the Preservation of the Koran[99]. This organisation later became the Jamma Islamiyya and initially limited its activities to questions of faith and morality. However, with the economic crisis of the late 1970s, the Islamists started to propose a more socio-economic project, opening themselves to unions and workers[100]. Political concerns followed suit in 1980 with the establishment of the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), an Islamist political movement which was refused recognition from the government and heavily repressed[101]. The change of regime in 1987, with Ben Ali freeing thousands of Islamists, including the leader Rachid Ghanoushi, brought the MTI to change its name to Hizb' Al Nahda (the Reinassance Party) looking for a government recognition that never arrived. Instead, after the Islamists independent list won 14 per cent of the vote as opposed to 5 per cent of all other opposition groups combined, Al Nahda was brutally repressed by the regime of Ben Ali, and any other form of independent civil society activity was frozen[102].

Therefore, given the incredibly repressive nature of the Tunisian regime in more recent years, the Islamist movements could not be actively involved in social and charity activities on the ground as it had been the case for the MB in Egypt. Despite this, the re-islamisation of the Tunisian society was a reality for at least a decade before the uprising of 2011[103]. As the human rights activist Ilhem Abdelkifi pointed out:

"Tunisians are religious. [Al-Nahda] will attract those who do not know where to go[104]."

Furthermore, interviews with Islamist leaders indicated globalisation and economic restructuring as a relevant factor in producing a return to Islam. In particular, Rachid Ghanoushi explicitly condemned economic restructuring brought about by globalisation for:

'marginalizing the most vulnerable and favouring the most powerful[105]'

Thus, even in the case of Tunisia, where ruthless repression made it impossible for Islamist movements to take control of civil society and build religious social

capital, economic reforms and globalisation are generally recognised as the sources of the re-Islamisation of society in recent times[106].

As noticed by Noueihed:

'Arab leaders demonstrated a knack for "upgrading authoritarianism" to survive the challenges posed not only by globalisation […] One of several tactics they employed was to curtail, co-opt, compete with and therefore undermine efforts to build a strong civil society through the creation of non-governmental organisations'[107].

This was certainly the case of Libya, where Gaddafi soon after taking power started a policy of complete eradication of any sort of civil society structure[108]. Granted, this was somehow easier in this country than anywhere else. The literature is indeed consensual on tracing back the origins of the fragmentation of the Libyan civil society in the legacy of the Italian colonization[109]. The Italians were ruthless in their colonization efforts and tore Libyan society apart leaving little in exchange[110]. Given the way in which the Italian colonization process was carried on and, concluded, Libyan society did not benefit from the establishment of solid political institutions, an effective legal system or an education infrastructure[111]. However, if some elements of civil society are to be identified in the Libyan case, these are related to the spread of Islam. Already under King Idris, immediately after the independence, the Muslim Brotherhood managed to penetrate Libya from neighboring Egypt. Despite the heavy repression of its members carried on by Gaddafi, the Muslim Brotherhood remained active into the 1980s and 1990s. Although clearly a small group of mainly educated people and intellectuals, it did represent one of the few instances of civil society organizations in the country. When Gaddafi finally decided to crash it completely, at the end of the 1990s, the Brotherhood's presence in Libya was much reduced, but the consequence was, as in other countries, the radicalization of Islam and its deeper penetration in the minds of Libyan people[112] as the only possibility of resistance to the Dictator[113]. This happened, however, after Libya had been politically and economically isolated by the West, a political economy isolation which brought to economic marginalization[114]. No doubt these dynamics will play a role in the post-Gaddafi Libyan political and social order, although the situation is much complicated by other elements such as tribal rivalries and, above all, the question of the control of oil[115].

Concluding, globalisation-induced economic restructuring, by either restricting the ability of the state to protect the poor and the middle classes or by causing a profound identity crisis in civil society through state repression, strengthened the hand of political Islam and undermined the legitimacy of the regimes in the resource-poor countries of the MENA area, including Egypt and Tunisia[116].

Such a process did not occur suddenly on the eve of the Arab Spring. In Egypt this was clearly the consequence of a capillary penetration of Islam in civil society thanks to its capacity to foster social capital and develop well-established solidarity networks both between lower and middle classes as well as within them (binding and bridging social capital, in the classification of the relevant literature)[117].

Thus, in Egypt, as well as in other resource-poor MENA countries such as Jordan[118], and Yemen, the Islamic Social Institutions (ISIs), which were adding to the

creation of social capital, also created horizontal and vertical social networks of solidarity among the discontented middle classes and the dispossessed poor ones. However, these prevailing forms of social capital were based on an Islamic view of society and the state; they were therefore alternative to both the *status quo* and to more secular social movements. In these cases, civil society was indeed empowered by globalisation, as proposed by transnationalists. However, this occurred by favouring the creation of a distinct Islamic social capital, binding both the middle classes and the poorer strata of society more closely in the name of a vision of the state and society alternative to both the existing regimes and a more secular project. Islamism, as an ideology, permeated the middle and poor strata of society cementing a new socio-economic alliance, or, as Gramsci would put it, a new socio-economic historic bloc[119].

Similarly, in Tunisia Islamism came to penetrate deeply into civil society and to represent a strong factor of cohesion between the middle and lower classes. Given the repressive nature of the state, which tightly controlled civil society as well as the welfare state, this could not happen through faith-based welfare provisions and religious social capital. However, by negating an evolution of civil society towards a model already prevailing in other Arab states, it enlarged the sources of discontent, especially amongst the marginalised strata of society, thus creating a vacuum which Islam increasingly filled. In a way, the evolutions of the Egyptian and Tunisian civil society (or lack of it) are the two sides of the same coin: by adopting *de facto* opposite attitudes towards the development of Islamic Social Institutions and social capital, the two regimes obtained exactly the same result, the empowerment of the Islamic ideology in opposition to both the *status quo* and any other alternative ideological/political projects.

Thus, as the corrupted nationalistic regimes in Egypt and Tunisia failed to guarantee prosperity to their societies, so these same societies turned to Islamism as the only alternative to the *status quo*. These new approaches to constitutional order based on political Islam progressively grew into meaningful alternatives to the declining statism of the regimes[120].

To a certain extent, this analysis about the radicalization and penetration of Islam in society can be applied also to the case of Libya. However, the case of Libya, as an oil-producing country, requires a more detailed analysis of the political economy of oil.

Conclusion

Although some progress has been achieved in terms of increasing the educational attainments of women in the MENA area, their marginalization seem to be further warranted by the two phenomena identified in this article. On the one side, the lack of integration of most of MENA countries in the global political economy seems to be a consequence of its incapacity to catch up with the technological skills necessary to upgrade its productive and economic systems. If this is true for the general population, as clearly demonstrated in this article, it is even truer for women, who represent a social group increasingly lagging behind in the

process of up-skilling and in the acquisition of the technological expertise necessary to integrate in the new global economy.

On the other hand, as a consequence of the retreat of the Middle Eastern and Arab State from the provision of jobs and public services, Arab societies seem to have undergone a process of Islamisation which penalizes especially women.

This is related both to the need for women to provide those services previously offered by the State and also to the role that women are perceived to have in a more radicalized context, which limits women's possibility to gain centre stage in the economic and public life.

None of these two developments looks good for the future of women in the MENA area.

Short biography:

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[63] Ramadan 2012:75; similarly Clark 2004:13-14; Ayubi 1991
[64] Ramadan 2012:75
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[68] Meddeb 2008
[69] Sadat was killed in 1981 by a member of the Jihad, a militant Islamic group that had split from the MB in the early 1970s. Rutherford 2008:83.
[70] Rutherford 2008:20
[71] Meddeb 2008
[72] A different issue is the discussion of the role of civil society in promoting democracy in general and in the Middle East. For this see Blair, H. (1997) Donors, democratisation, and civil society: Relating theory to practice. In Hulme, D., and M. Edwards (eds) (1997), Too Close for Comfort? NGOs, States and. Donors. Basingstoke: Macmillan and New York: St Martins' Press.

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[77] AHDR 2002:110
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[79] AHDR 2009:71
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[81] AHDR 2002:110
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